



SANDAG

CRIMINAL JUSTICE BULLETIN

2020 Adult Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region

AUGUST 2021

Research findings from the Criminal Justice Clearinghouse

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Highlights

Drug use is at a 21-year high for males

In 2020, 82% of adult males tested positive for at least one illicit substance. This 3% increase from 2019 brings male drug use to a new 21-year high. Two-thirds (67%) of adult females tested positive for a substance, a significant decrease from the 82% reported in 2019 and the lowest positive rate for adult females since 2015. This large decrease could reflect booking policies that were modified as a result of the pandemic which impacted who was available to be interviewed for this project.

Methamphetamine remains drug of choice for adults with justice system contact

Despite regional efforts to combat methamphetamine (meth) use, it remained the drug of choice for adults with justice contact, with 57% of males and 53% of females positive in 2020. The male rate was an increase of 2% from 2019 and a 21-year high, while the female rate represented a drop from 2019 (when it was 66%).

Despite legalization, arrestees continue to obtain marijuana illegally

In 2020, 62% of arrestees reported obtaining marijuana in multiple ways, with the most common methods including through a recreational dispensary (95%) and illegally on the street (74%). Sixty-six percent (65%) reported that marijuana was “**VERY EASY**” to obtain.

Fentanyl remains a concern in the region

While only 15% of arrestees said they had ever used fentanyl without a prescription, it was the most common illegally used prescription drug in the past 30 days and around one in four (27%) arrestees reported that they thought a drug they had used contained it, even though they did not purchase it with the intent of buying fentanyl.

About 1 in 3 adult arrestees report mental health issues

In 2020, 37% of the arrestees interviewed reported they had ever been diagnosed with a mental health or psychiatric disorder, 31% reported they had previously stayed at least overnight for mental health treatment, and 23% had previously tried to commit suicide. Eighteen percent (18%) said they had experienced a psychiatric episode after drug use.

Background

This CJ Bulletin, 2020 Adult Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region, is one in a series highlighting findings from data collected as part of the San Diego County Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program.

Since 2004, when federal funding for the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program was suspended, San Diego has been the only site to continue this project uninterrupted. With funding from the SANDAG Criminal Justice Clearinghouse, these data have been reported on an annual basis, providing useful information to policy makers, law enforcement, prevention, and treatment professionals regarding drug use trends and involvement in other risky or illegal behavior over time. In 2020, this data collection effort was generously supported by the San Diego-Imperial HIDTA (High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area); Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services; the District Attorney's Office; and the Public Safety Group. Their support, as well as the cooperation of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, is gratefully acknowledged.

As part of this project, arrestees are approached (using a random sampling method) within 48 hours of their booking into jail. If the arrestee is available and willing to participate in a confidential interview, she/he/they is asked a series of questions related to drug use history and to provide a urine sample for drug testing. In 2020, 233 male arrestees were interviewed at the Central Jail and 85 female arrestees at Las Colinas. Of these 318 arrestees, 308 (97%) completed the interview and provided a valid urine sample for analysis.

It is important to note that the pandemic affected this project in 2020. While the interviews were able to continue, administrative procedures and survey methodologies were refined to ensure the health and safety of both the interviewers and those being interviewed, including administering a shortened interview instrument. These changes, coupled with changes in terms of who was booked into jails at this time, may affect the statistics presented here and limit the validity of comparisons to prior years.

What information is collected through these interviews?

Positive drug rates for any and multiple drugs (page 5)

Positive rates for marijuana, methamphetamine, cocaine, and opiates over time (page 7)

Self-reported initiation patterns of drug use (page 9)

Drug market dynamics (page 11)

Prescription drug abuse (page 12)

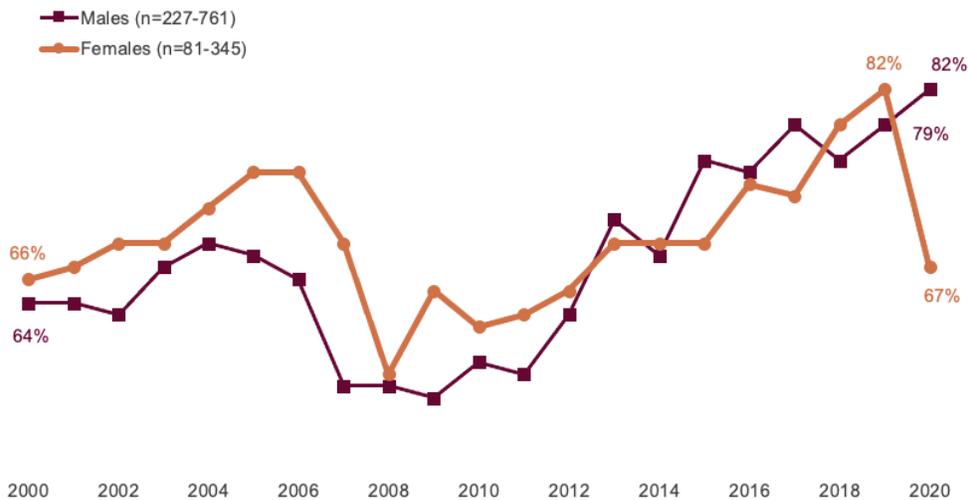
Binge drinking (page 14)

Risk factors to recidivate (page 15)

How has testing positive for any drug changed over time for male and female arrestees?

In 2020, 82% of male arrestees and 67% of female arrestees tested positive for an illicit drug, which includes marijuana,¹ meth, cocaine, opiates, and PCP. The 2020 female positive rate of 67% was a decrease from the 82% reported in 2019 (which could reflect changed booking policies) and the lowest rate since 2015. The 2020 male positive rate of 82% was a 21-year high and 3% higher than the 2019 rate (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Drug use for adult males up in 2020, but down for adult females



Note: Prior to 2013 and since 2015, percent positive was based on marijuana, meth, cocaine, opiates, and PCP. In 2013 and 2014, the PCP test was replaced with a test for alcohol.

Source: SANDAG, 2021

What were the characteristics of the arrestees interviewed?

Of the 308 arrestees with completed interviews, 227 (74%) were male and 81 (26%) were female. Thirty-nine percent (39%) were Hispanic, 37% White, 20% Black, and 4% “other”. Four percent (4%) of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. Seventeen percent (17%) of those interviewed were under the age of 25, 53% between 25 and 39, and 31% 40 and older. The mean age was 35.9 (range 18 to 72). Two-thirds (66%) were single, 19% divorced, separated, or widowed, and 16% married.

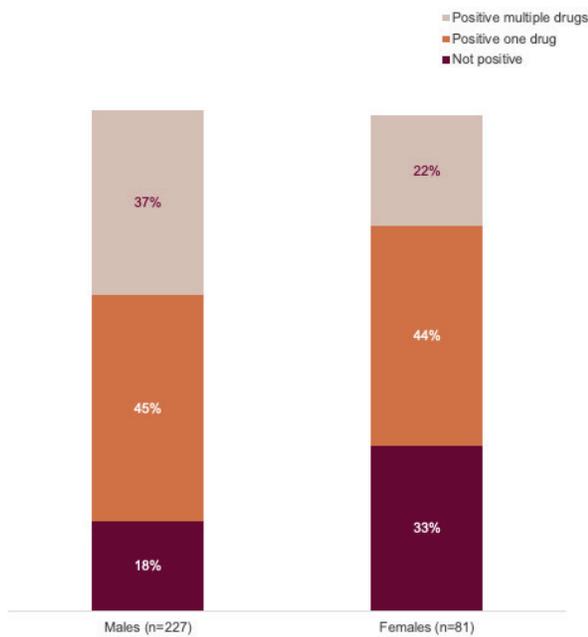
Forty-five percent (45%) were booked for a violent offense, 22% for an “other” offense, 18% for a property offense, and 15% for a drug offense. Thirty-two percent (32%) reported living in the Central Major Statistical Area of the County, 21% in East Suburban, 15% in South Suburban, 11% in North City, 5% in North County East, 5% in North County West, 3% in East County, and 10% out of County.

¹ The drug test panel continues to include marijuana even though California voters approved Proposition 64 on November 8, 2016. Marijuana will continue to be tested because it remains illegal federally and because changes in use pre- and post-legalization among this population is expected to continue to be an issue of interest.

How many arrestees are polydrug² users?

Around 1 in 3 (37% of male and 22% of female) arrestees tested positive for more than one drug in 2020 (Figure 2). Of these, 78% tested positive for two and 22% tested positive for three drugs. Of those who tested positive for multiple substances, 91% were positive for meth, 83% marijuana, 29% opiates, 17% cocaine/crack, and 2% PCP.

Figure 2
Around 1 in 3 arrestees tested positive for more than one drug in 2020

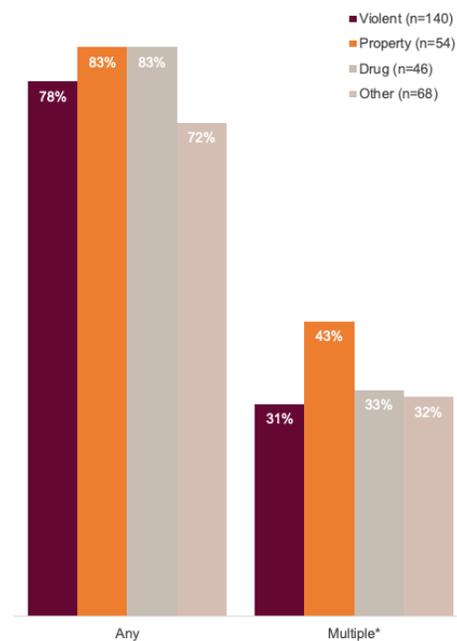


Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.
 Source: SANDAG, 2021

How does testing positive vary by the arrestee's highest booking charge?

As Figure 3 shows, regardless of crime type, around three-quarters or more of arrestees tested positive for a drug in 2020 and around 1 in 3 or more tested positive for multiple drugs. There was no significant difference in the percent positive for any or multiple drugs by highest booking charge.

Figure 3
No difference in positive rates by highest booking charge



*Significant at $p < .05$.
 Source: SANDAG, 2021

Takeaway

Regardless of why someone is booked into jail, substance use is an issue for many arrestees, with four-fifths testing positive for at least one drug overall. In addition, about 1 in 3 of the males and 1 in 5 of the females interviewed were current polydrug users. Among polydrug users, meth and marijuana were used more than any other drug combination.

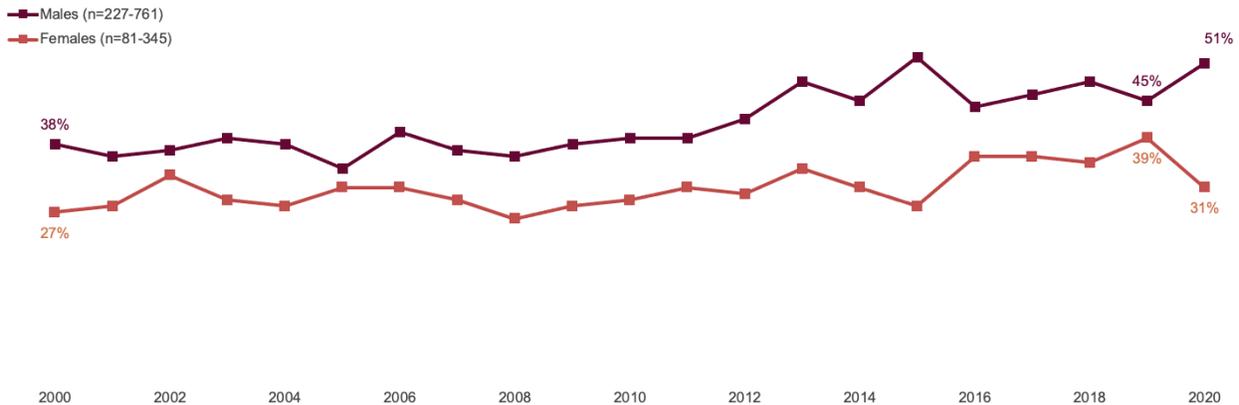
² Polydrug use refers to the use of two or more psychoactive drugs in combination to achieve a particular effect.

How have positive rates by drug type changed over time?

The percent of male arrestees positive for marijuana was up 6% in 2020, with 51% positive for the drug, compared to 45% in 2019. This was a new 21-year high. However, for female arrestees, the percent positive decreased 8%, to 31% (from 39% in 2019), the lowest rate since 2015 (Figure 4). Arrestees under the age of 25 were significantly more likely to test positive for marijuana (65%), compared to those between 25 and 39 (41%) and 40 years of age and older (43%). Arrestees who identified as Black were also significantly more likely to test positive for marijuana (60%), compared to 43% of those who identified as White and 41% who identified as Hispanic.

Figure 4

Marijuana use up for adult males, down for adult females

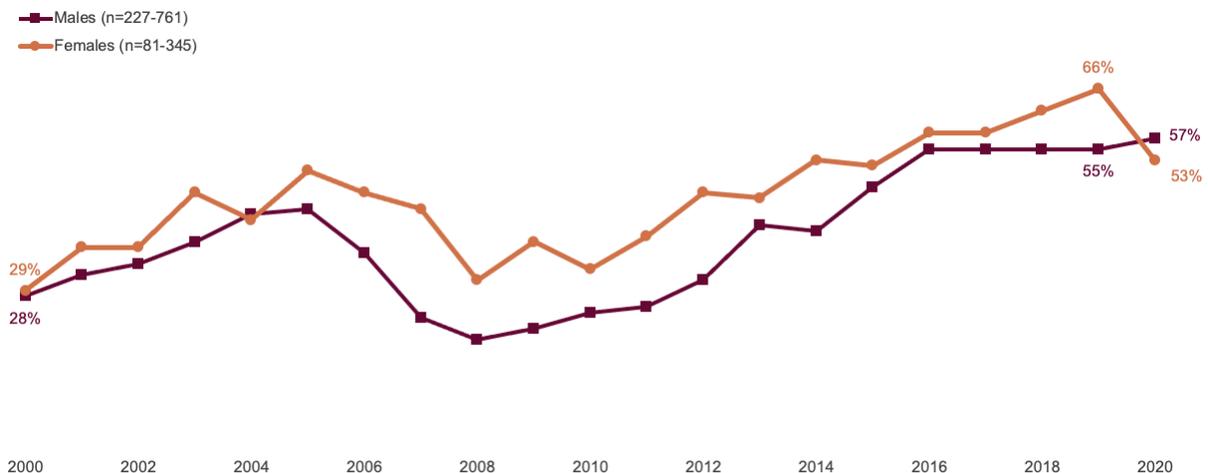


Source: SANDAG, 2021

For meth, the percent of males that tested positive increased from 55% in 2019 to 57% in 2020, a new 21-year high. The female rate decreased from 66% in 2019 to 53% in 2020, the lowest rate since 2015 (Figure 5). Recent meth use also varied significantly by an arrestee's age. Specifically, older arrestees (58% of those 25 to 39 and 62% of those 40 and older) were more likely to test positive for meth than those under the age of 25 (41%).

Figure 5

Meth positive rates at all-time high for males in 2020



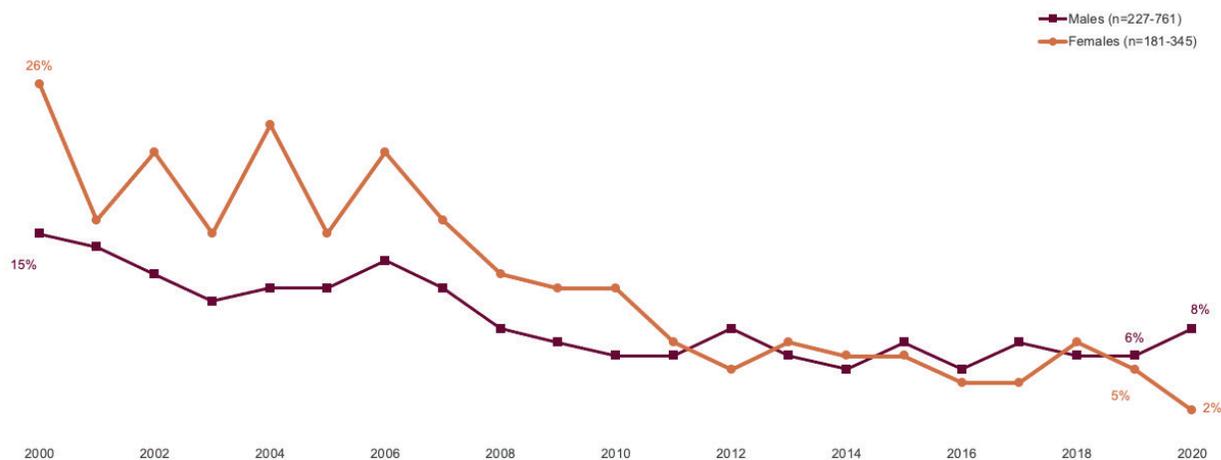
Source: SANDAG, 2021

How many arrestees tested positive for just marijuana?

39% of the adult arrestees who tested positive for marijuana in 2020 did not test positive for anything else, but 61% did – either meth, opiates, crack/cocaine, or some combination.

The percent of arrestees positive for cocaine was up slightly for males (8% in 2020, compared to 6% in 2019), but down for females (2% in 2020, compared to 5% in 2019) (Figure 6). There were no differences in cocaine use by age, but there was by ethnicity, with 15% of Black individuals positive, compared to 6% of White and 4% of Hispanic individuals.

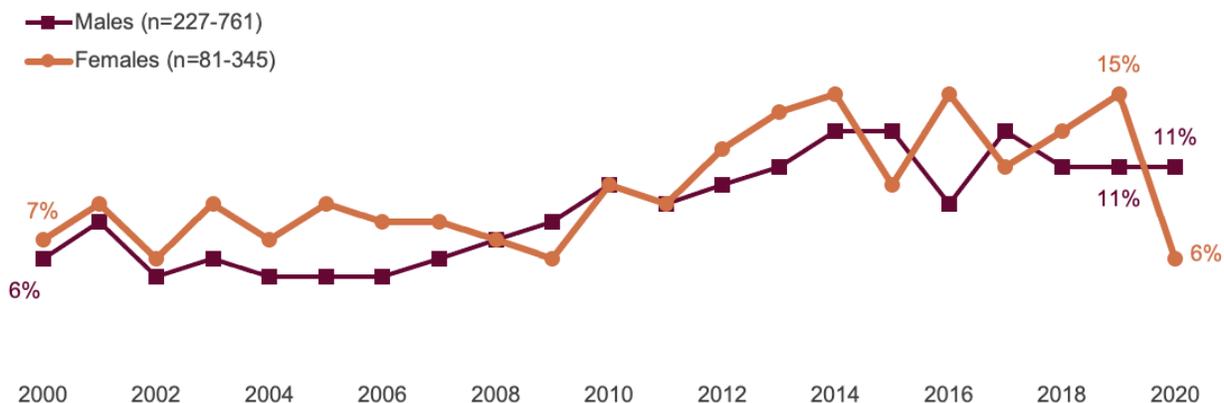
Figure 6
Cocaine positive rates up for males, down for females



Source: SANDAG, 2021

For opiates,³ the percent of males that were positive remained steady at 11% in 2020, but the percent of females positive decreased to 6%, from 15% in 2019 (Figure 7). There were also variation in use that approached significance in terms of age (18% of those under 25, compared to 10% of those 25 to 39, and 5% of those 40 and older) and ethnicity (15% for individuals who identified as White, 10% Black, and 6% Hispanic).

Figure 7
Males more likely than females to test positive for opiates in 2020



Source: SANDAG, 2021

In addition, 1% of adult arrestees tested positive for PCP in 2020, which included 1% of females and <1% of males.

³ It should be noted that a positive opiate drug test could indicate use of opiates other than heroin, including morphine, hydrocodone, hydromorphone, and codeine.

Takeaway

In 2020, meth remained the drug of choice for San Diego County arrestees, with more than half of adult males and females positive for the drug. Marijuana and cocaine use also were up slightly for male arrestees.

How does history of drug use vary by drug type?

Marijuana was the drug most commonly tried by arrestees (89%) and also was tried at the earliest age (14.6) – about five years earlier than any other drug. Those who used it in the past 30 days used it an average of 16.0 days (Table 1).

Meth was tried by two-thirds (66%) of the arrestees and was reported by the highest percent (83%) as having been used in the last year. Meth users reported using it an average of 17.9 days out of the past 30, more often than any other drug.

Cocaine was tried by over half (56%) of arrestees and at the youngest average age (19.4), following marijuana. Thirty percent (30%) reported using cocaine in the past year and the average use in the past month was 4.1 days.

Heroin was tried by 31% of arrestees, about three-fifths (58%) of whom had used it in the past year. Heroin was used an average of 17.2 days in the past 30 of those who had used it.

Crack was tried by 29% of arrestees and was least likely to be used in the last year (6%). Those who used it in the past month did so an average of 4.5 days.

Table 1

Self-reported drug use history varies by drug

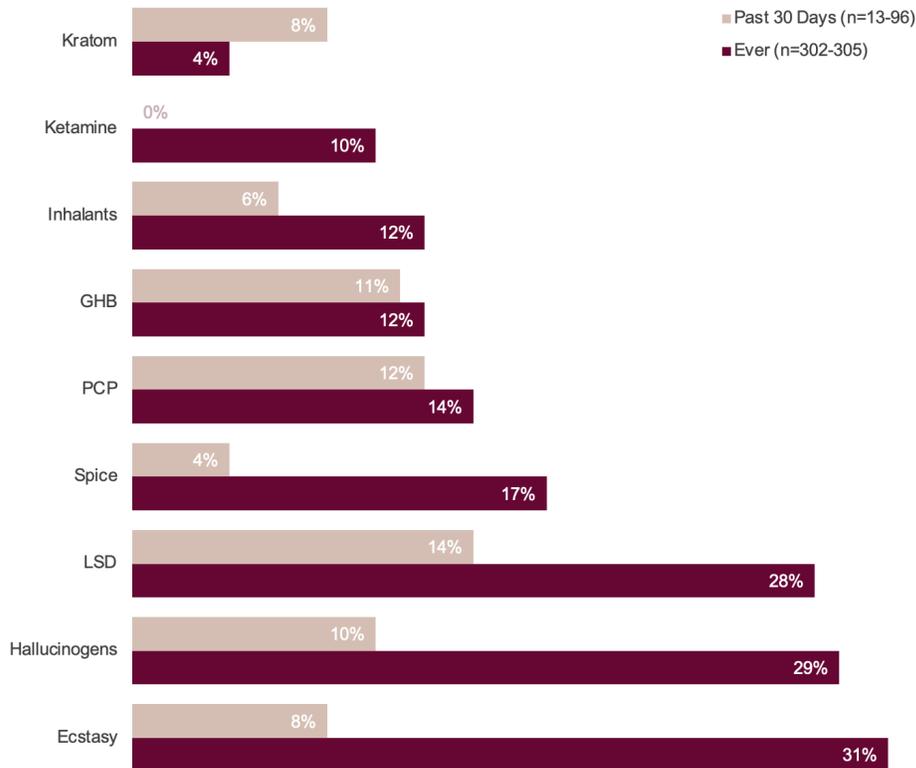
How many have ever tried?	What was the average age at first use?	Of those who've tried it, how many used in the last year?	Of those who used in the past 30 days, how many days did they use on average?
89% marijuana	14.6 marijuana	72% marijuana	16.0 marijuana
66% meth	21.3 meth	83% meth	17.9 meth
56% cocaine	19.4 cocaine	30% cocaine	4.1 cocaine
31% heroin	24.1 heroin	58% heroin	17.2 heroin
29% crack	21.3 crack	6% crack	4.5 crack

Source: SANDAG, 2021

In addition to these five drugs, around half (53%) arrestees reported having ever tried at least one of nine other illicit substances, including ecstasy (31%), hallucinogens (29%), LSD (28%), spice (17%), PCP (14%), GHB (12%), inhalants (12%), ketamine (10%), and kratom (4%). When those who had ever used an illegal substance were asked if they had used it in the past 30 days, LSD (14%), PCP (12%), GHB (11%), and hallucinogens (10%) were the most common answers (Figure 8).

Kratom use was added to the interview in 2019. Kratom is a tropical tree native to Southeast Asia with leaves that contain compounds with psychotropic effects. Kratom is not illegal at the time of this report and is sold as an extract or gum.

Figure 8
Percent of arrestees who have tried other illicit drugs ever and in the past 30 days



Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2021

Due to the increased attention to combatting synthetic drug use in San Diego County, questions were added to the instrument to better understand why individuals use spice. Specifically, 50% of those who ever used spice said they use it as an alternative to marijuana and 40% said they use it to avoid a positive drug test.

Takeaway

Among arrestees, drug use history and current use varies by drug. Of those who ever tried a drug, meth users were most likely to report use in the last year and most frequent use in the last 30 days. Among other illicit drugs ever tried, ecstasy and other hallucinogens were most common, but LSD was among the other types of drugs arrestees were most likely to have recently used.

How easy is it to obtain different drugs, according to arrestees?

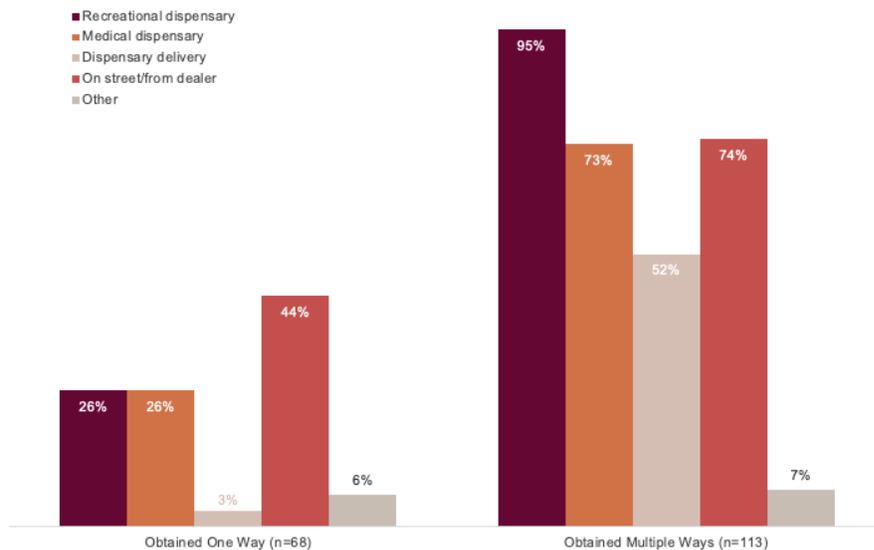
Over the years, a number of standard questions have been asked of arrestees regarding drugs they may have obtained, including what they traded to get it (cash and/or non-cash means), how easy it was to obtain, and if they got it in the same area in which they lived. In 2020, the only question in this series that was asked pertained to how easy it was to obtain different drugs. Just under two-thirds (65%) of individuals said it was **“VERY EASY”** to obtain marijuana, followed by those who said it was **“VERY EASY”** to obtain crack (46%), meth (44%), heroin (35%), and cocaine (33%).

In addition, more detailed questions have been added since recreational use was legalized regarding marijuana, including how individuals obtain the drug.

- Almost two-thirds (62%) of arrestees reported they obtained marijuana in more than one way in 2020, with 38% saying they had just one preferred way. Of those who said they just obtained it only one way, the most common was illegally on the street (44%), followed by a recreational dispensary (26%), medical dispensary (26%), other ways (6%), and delivery from a dispensary (3%). For those who obtained it multiple ways, 95% used a recreational dispensary, 74% illegally on the street, 73% from a medical dispensary, 52% delivery from a dispensary, and 7% other ways (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Arrestees report obtaining marijuana in a variety of ways in the past 12 months



Source: SANDAG, 2021

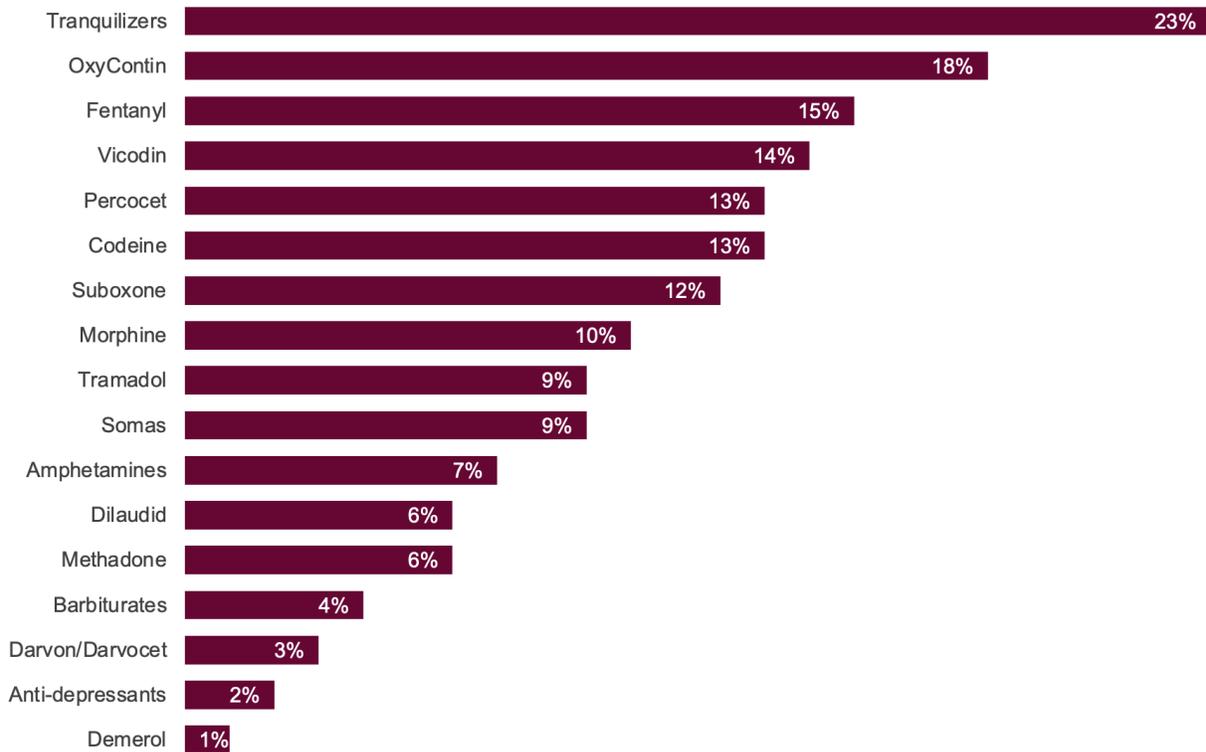
- When asked their **preferred method**, those who obtained it only one way most often said illegally on the street (40%). The preferred method for those who used multiple ways was legal dispensary (45%), with 15% saying illegally on the street.
- When asked the reasons behind their preferred method, the most common for recreational dispensaries was that it was easier, for those who preferred medical dispensaries, the most common reason cited was the quality, for those who preferred illegally on the street, it was because this was the quickest method, and for those who preferred delivery, the most often cited reason was that it was convenient.

What do we know about prescription drug abuse by the arrestee population?

In 2020, 46% of arrestees reported they had ever abused prescription drugs, with the most commonly abused including tranquilizers (i.e., benzodiazepines), OxyContin, fentanyl, Vicodin, Percocet, and codeine (Figure 10). When those who had ever abused a prescription drug were asked if they had abused it in the past 30 days, the top five drugs currently being abused included fentanyl (61%), tranquilizers (17%), Suboxone (11%), methadone (10%), and barbiturates (7%).

Figure 10

Tranquilizers, OxyContin, fentanyl, and Vicodin, among most commonly abused prescription drugs



Total = 301–306

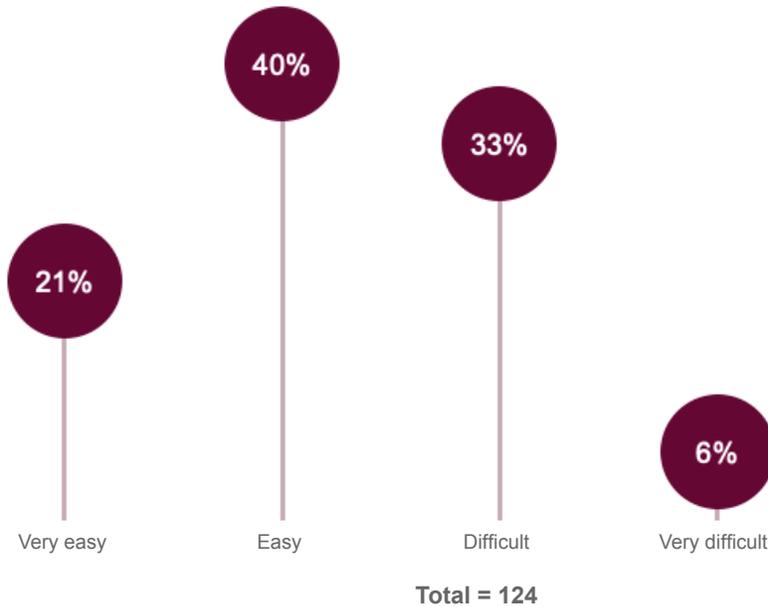
Source: SANDAG, 2021

Arrestees who abused prescription drugs were significantly more likely to test positive for marijuana (57% versus 35%) and meth (69% versus 44%).

When asked to describe how they had obtained the prescription drugs, the most common ways included that they were given it (81%), they bought it from someone illegally (64%), or they took it from someone (24%). When asked how difficult it was to obtain prescription drugs illegally, over three-fifths said it was “**VERY EASY**” or “**EASY**” (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Most arrestees say prescription drugs are easy to get



Source: SANDAG, 2021

Just over 1 in 4 (26%) heroin users said they were hooked on prescription opiates before they began using the street drug and of these, 83% said they began to use heroin as a substitute for prescription opiates.

Given the recent national attention to the dangers of fentanyl, new questions were added to the SAM questionnaire including “*If you knew a drug contained fentanyl, would you purchase it?*” Overall, 91% of the arrestees said they would not purchase it, but 9% said they would. When asked if they had used a drug they thought contained fentanyl, even if they were not told it did, just over one in four (27%) said they thought they had.

In another series of questions, arrestees were asked if they had ever used fentanyl test strips to see if their drugs contained fentanyl, and if they had not, would they. While only 5% of arrestees said they had used these strips, almost half (46%) said they would if they were available.

Takeaway

In addition to using illicit drugs, a number of arrestees have a history of abusing prescription drugs, including those later addicted to heroin. Fentanyl was used most often in the past 30 days by those who had abused prescription drugs and around one in four arrestees thought a drug they had purchased had fentanyl in it. The most common way of obtaining a prescription drug was to be given it.

What do we know about arrestee use of alcohol?

The majority of both male and female arrestees reported at least one prior binge drinking episode (defined as five drinks or more for males and four drinks or more for females), with males doing so at an earlier age (16.2) than females (18.3). Around 1 in 3 of both genders reported drinking any alcohol in the 24 hours prior to their arrest. Additional analyses revealed that individuals who reported binge drinking in the past 30 days were more likely to test positive for cocaine (13% versus 4%).

Figure 12

Male and female arrestee alcohol use history

Male		Female	
81% ever binge drank		86% ever binge drank	
16.2 average age first binge*	5.2 average number of drinks in past 24 hours	18.3 average age first binge*	4.3 average number of drinks in past 24 hours
38% binge drank past 30 days	35% self-report drinking any alcohol in the past 24 hours	35% binge drank past 30 days	35% self-report drinking any alcohol in the past 24 hours

*Significant at $p < .05$
 Note: Cases with missing information not included.
 Source: SANDAG, 2021

Takeaway

Alcohol remains the drug of choice for many adults in the justice system, with more than 4 in 5 arrestees reporting ever binge drinking. Around one-third drank alcohol within 24 hours of their arrest.

What do we know about vaping?

Given the growth in e-cigarettes and vaping over the past several years, new questions were added to the interview in 2019 regarding their history of vaping, the types of products vaped, and the frequency of use of vaping products. In 2020, arrestees were only asked about whether they had ever vaped and 59% reported they had. Arrestees under 25 were significantly more likely to report ever vaping (73%), compared to those 25 to 39 (63%), and those over the age of 40 (46%). Those who identified as White were also more likely to report vaping (70%), compared to those who identified as Black (63%) or Hispanic (46%).

What other underlying factors or needs do these arrestees have that can shed light on the risk to recidivate?

Prior arrests and incarcerations

- Eighty-eight percent (88%) of arrestees reported having a previous arrest (90% of males and 81% of females).
- Just over four-fifths (82%) reported previously serving time in jail (85% of males and 74% of females).

Involvement in drug distribution

- Just over one in three (37%) said they had ever been involved in selling drugs.

Exchanging sex/pimping/pandering

- Fifteen percent (15%) report they have ever been approached by someone to pimp/prostitute them, including 33% of females and 9% of males.

Mental health issues

- Over one-third (37%) of the arrestees reported they had ever been diagnosed with a mental or psychiatric disorder and 31% reported they had previously stayed at least overnight for mental health treatment at a hospital or other facility.
- Having a mental health diagnosis was significantly related to race. Arrestees identified as White were significantly more likely to report having a diagnosis (45%), compared to Blacks (37%) and Hispanics (29%).
- Of those who had ever been admitted to a mental health or psychiatric facility for at least an overnight stay, the mean number of stays was 4.1 (range 1 to 50).
- Almost one in four (23%) arrestees reported they had ever tried to commit suicide (33% of females and 19% of males). In addition, 35% said they had seriously thought about it. Those who reported a mental health diagnosis were more likely to say they had tried to commit suicide (41% versus 12% without a diagnosis).
- Arrestees were asked if they had ever taken a drug that led to a psychotic episode. Eighteen percent (18%) said they had, with meth being the drug most often mentioned as leading to this occurrence (62%).

Figure 13

Many adults interviewed have common risk factors to be addressed

4 in 5

Have been previously arrested or in jail

3 in 4

Not employed

2 in 3

Have been homeless

1 in 2

Of those who overdosed on heroin have been administered naloxone (and 1 in 3 of those have received 3 or more times)

2 in 5

Have received drug treatment previously

1 in 3

Have sold drugs, had a mental health diagnosis, or contact with Child Welfare Services

1 in 5

Have injected drugs, had a drug overdose or had a psychotic episode related to drug use

Source: SANDAG, 2021

Education, employment, and insurance

- Thirteen percent (13%) did not have a high school degree or equivalent and 27% reported they were employed (full-time, part-time, or as active military) at the time of their arrest. Nineteen percent (19%) said they currently did not have health insurance.

Homelessness

- Seventy percent (70%) of those interviewed reported ever being homeless and 31% described themselves as being homeless in the past 30 days.
- Twenty-four percent (24%) said they had stayed in a shelter in the past 12 months (up from 14% the year prior). When asked why they had not stayed in a shelter, 48% said they just did not want to, 21% concerns for safety, 20% because of restrictions and rules at the shelter, 9% wait lists, 4% because they have family, friends, or a pet that is not allowed to stay there, and 17% provided an “other” answer (that included have someplace else to stay, personal pride, and don’t know how to).
- When those who were primarily homeless in the past 30 days were asked what they thought their housing status would be a year from now, 51% said they thought they would be living in a stable housing situation, 32% thought they would still be homeless, and 18% described some other housing status that was temporary or a group setting.

Drug treatment needs

- Overall, 40% of the arrestees said they had received drug treatment in the past.
- For 55% of those who had received treatment, the last program was court-ordered (as opposed to voluntary). Individuals who reported having a prior arrest (44% versus 14%) were more likely to have received treatment.
- In a new question added in 2020, 27% of arrestees reported they knew what medically assisted treatment was (use of medicine in combination with counseling and behavioral therapy) and of these, 27% had received it.
- Seventy percent (70%) of the arrestees reported that every time they had sought drug treatment, it had been available. Fifty-five percent (55%) said they could benefit from treatment now.

Dependent children

- Fifty-eight percent (58%) of arrestees reported having children, including 54% of males and 70% of females.
- Around 1 in 5 (19%) reported they currently live with a child, whether or not their own. Females were more likely to report living with a child, compared to males (27% versus 16%).
- Almost half (45%) of female arrestees and 21% of males reported prior Child Welfare System (CWS) contact (29% overall).

Driving under the influence

Twenty-nine percent (29%) of arrestees reported they had ever been arrested for driving under the influence (DUI) as an adult. When asked what they were under the influence of (the most recent time they were arrested for a DUI if more than once), 74% said alcohol, 16% drugs, and 11% both. When further asked what drug they had used, 36% said marijuana, 36% meth, 23% prescription drugs (they were not prescribed), and 5% each crack, heroin, and cocaine.

Injecting drugs

Around one in five (21%) of those interviewed said they had ever injected drugs, with those who identified as White most likely to do so (29%), followed by those who identify as Hispanic (20%), and Black (5%). Twenty-eight percent (28%) of those who said they ever injected reported they had injected in the past year and 28% of these individuals reported they had shared their needle or works in the last year.

Overdosing and naloxone

Overall, around one in five (19%) arrestees said they had ever overdosed on a drug and 25% reported having to visit an emergency room because of an alcohol- or other drug-related incident. Just under half (45%) of arrestees who had ever overdosed reported they had been administered naloxone; a medication designed to rapidly reverse opioid overdose at least once. Additional questions about naloxone, included:

- How many times they had been administered it, with 58% getting it once, 12% twice, and 31% three or more times.
- Who administered it, with responses including emergency medical services or EMS (38%), friends (35%), healthcare providers (19%), law enforcement (19%), and family (4%).
- Whether the person who gave them naloxone talked to them about getting treatment for their addiction, over half (54%) said they had overall.

Takeaway

Many of the arrestees booked into local jails have a prior history of justice system involvement, homelessness, drug and mental health treatment needs, employment and housing challenges, and/or children who are dependent on them. Understanding and documenting these underlying risk factors is important in ensuring that individuals can be assisted as they reenter the community from incarceration.